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Writing under the Influence: The Fiction of the Artist under Contract in Novels of Organized Crime from Italy and Mexico

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Abstract

FICTION writers have sought to provide original descriptions of the mafia's obscure and changing worlds and reflect on their own representational strategies by using metaliterary devices. In Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* (2004), Walter Siti's *Resistere non serve a niente* (2012) and Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *Contrabando* (2008), the representation of the *artist under contract* with organized crime provides a narrative content and a metaliterary figure which can help us make sense of the complex relationship between literary fiction and organized crime. The artist under contract is shown to put their own credibility at risk and reflect from a position of fragility and dependence. From the intra-diegetic representation of an author under contract with organized crime—a key aspect of Herrera's *Trabajos del reino*—, to the blurring of the autobiographical pact with the reader in *Resistere non serve a niente* and *Contrabando*, this article asks how authors creatively question the credibility and the authority of their own literary discourse on organized crime. Through the study of the contractual aspects of the literary text (as an intra-diegetic component and a constitutive element of the autofiction genre), the article discusses the hermeneutic value of fiction: is there a productive use of ambiguity that can facilitate the interpretation of the secretive and ambiguous worlds of organized crime?

And understanding meant being part of it somehow. I had no choice; as far as I'm concerned, it's the only way to understand things.

Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra*

Introduction

IN 2006, Roberto Saviano brought international attention to the camorra with his reportage *Gomorra* (2006) [*Gomorra* (2007)], both a striking depiction of the mafioso “system” [*sistema*] in Naples and a hybrid textual form which blurred the boundaries between the genres of essay, novel and testimony. The debates

surrounding *Gomorra* took place in the broader context of a “ritorno alla realtà” (“return to reality”) in Italian literature (Donnarumma and Policastro 28).¹ *Gomorra* was also related to the global rise of new forms of narrative non-fiction called “narrations documentaires” [“documentary narrations”] by the French critic Lionel Ruffel (13). Ruffel believes Saviano’s book goes beyond the informative function of journalistic discourse and seeks to express a totalizing interpretation of organized crime: “Roberto Saviano, écrivain-journaliste ‘embarqué’ [tente] de restituer de manière intégrale à la fois l’histoire et son expérience de la camorra” (16) [“Roberto Saviano, an embedded writer-journalist, (attempts) to render in an integral fashion both the history and his experience of the camorra”]. In *Gomorra*, the narrator’s subjective, situated perspective on crime and violence becomes the prism through which the criminal foundation of the Italian economy and its global ramifications are integrally revealed to the reader.

In a contemporary moment in which the global implications of mafia-related crime have become a major strategic issue, critics justifiably expect narratives of organized crime to displace and subvert traditional tropes on the mafias, in order to facilitate the interpretation of current criminal processes. Saviano’s use of hyperboles and totalizing images in his texts was met with growing suspicion from sociologists and antimafia activists like Umberto Santino. In *ZeroZeroZero* (2013), a study of cocaine trafficking around the world, Saviano expanded the scope of his analysis to the entire globe and continued to rely on cosmic metaphors. He states that the new criminal power in control of the cocaine market “[h]a costruito il mondo moderno, ha generato un nuovo cosmo. Il Big Bang è partito da qui” (*ZeroZeroZero* 53) [“has built the modern world, generated a new cosmos. This was the Big Bang” (*Zero Zero Zero*)]. In this historical process, Saviano’s analysis strongly emphasizes the importance of Italy and Mexico, which he considers the foundational places of contemporary criminal empires: “Il Messico è l’origine di tutto. [...] Chi ignora il Messico non capirà mai il destino delle democrazie trasfigurate dai flussi del narcotraffico” (*ZeroZeroZero* 57) [“Mexico is the origin of everything. If you disregard Mexico, you’ll never understand the destiny of democracies transformed by drug trafficking” (*Zero Zero Zero*)].

Despite its totalizing ambition, Saviano’s approach of world criminality is but one of many and raises questions about the way local literary perspectives from the two countries reflect on organized crime. Drawing on the legacy of Leonardo Sciascia, Walter Siti, in *Resistere non serve a niente* (2012) [Resistance is Futile], has explored the nexus of power linking the political spheres and the new mafias in a quite distinct way. Siti, a professor of literature in the Scuola Normale of Pisa and a well-known editor of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s essays and poetry, published this novel in 2012 to denounce the infiltration of the new mafias in banking and financial economy. Meanwhile, in Mexico, since the beginning of the war on drugs, growing attention has been paid to literary expressions of drug trafficking in the contemporary Mexican literary movement termed “narcoliteratura”. Critics who reflected on

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

this movement, like Diana Palaversich have singled out two pieces which attempt to address the shaping of Mexican politics, economy, social life and culture by organized crime networks: Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *Contrabando* (2008) and Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* (2004) [*Kingdom Cons* (2017)] ("Narcoliteratura").

While these literary works put the power dynamics of organized crime under critical scrutiny, the way they explore and decode criminal environments varies. In *Gomorra*, Saviano explicitly advocates a form of literary activism close to the notion of *littérature engagée* [committed literature], approach scrutinized by Pierluigi Pellini ("Lo scrittore") and Alessandro Dal Lago. Both critics show that in *Gomorra*, the exploration of the criminal underworld in a first-person narrative, results in the heroization of the author as an exemplary figure and a moral authority. The three other novels, in contrast, distance themselves from the *engagé* stance of *Gomorra* by representing the confrontation of the lettered subject with organized crime in a more ambiguous light. In *Trabajos del reino*, the main character is an artist whose fascination with a criminal figure is a key element of the plot. The title of Siti's book, *Resistere non serve a niente* contradicts Saviano's conception of literature as an instrument of resistance against power, while reflecting on the author's irresistible attraction to evil. In several metanarrative digressions, Siti confesses his obscure, almost erotic "fascinazione per il male" (*Resistere* 297) ["fascination with evil"], a substitute for his inability to experience sexual desire: "una scossa come quella che una volta mi dava l'erotismo, se fossi ancora un individuo senziente" (243) ["a stirring like erotism once gave me, as if I were still able to feel"]. Sophie Esch, in her analysis of Rascón Banda's *Contrabando*, highlights the author's "position of ambiguity" (172) towards drug trafficking violence in Northern Mexico, showing that the novel constantly questions the writer's desire to "absorb the reality of his setting (in order to transform it into fiction)" (171).

The use of reflexivity and the representation of the artistic process in the novel is a key aesthetic component of all these texts and can be found in many other crime-related narratives. In her comparative study of Colombian and Mexican "narcoliteratura", *Narrating Narcos: Culiacán and Medellín* (2013), Gabriela Polit Dueñas underlines that many contemporary narratives of narcotrafficking represent the writer and dramatize the writing process of the novel. Polit Dueñas claims that by showing how the influence of organized crime shapes the writer's artistic work, these fictional configurations problematize the confrontation of the lettered subject with the criminal world and reflect on the political function of literature (47–63). Esch's study of *Contrabando* goes one step further, as it highlights the limits of interpreting this representation in terms that are exclusively ethical. Esch argues that critics should interpret the ambiguities of the texts in relation with their "particular discursive and metaliterary strategies as opposed to readings that tend to reduce the novel to its ethical positioning" (162). In this perspective, the three novels I intend to compare should primarily be read as a "metacommentary on the relationship between fictional literature and narcotrafficking" (Esch 162), or, in our case, organized criminality.

This metaliterary aspect, common to many narratives of organized crime, is thoroughly explored in the three novels, in which the representation of the *artist under contract* provides a narrative content and a metaliterary figure reflecting the complex relationship between literary fiction and organized crime. In Herrera's *Tabajos del reino*, Lobo, a writer of Mexican popular folk songs known as *corridos*, works as a resident balladmonger for a drug lord known as the King; the figure of the Artist exemplifies the mercenary function of art in the service of organized crime. In *Contrabando*, the narrator travels to his hometown Santa Rosa to write a movie script commissioned by Tony Aguilar, a singer whose links with the narco world are hinted at towards the end of the novel; the narrator of *Contrabando* witnesses various episodes of narco-related violence that he partly integrates in his script, causing Aguilar to reject it. In *Resistere non serve a niente*, finally, Walter Siti represents himself as a university professor paid by Tommaso, a successful trader, to write a book about his life; the trader later reveals that he is a member of the mafia, which leads the narrator to question his own motives when he decides to proceed with the project.

In his study of Siti's novel, Emmanuel Bouju underlines that the relation between the writer and the mafia is explicitly formalized as a contract: "L'une des forces du roman de Walter Siti est de ne rien dissimuler de l'ambiguïté, sinon de la perversion de la position de l'écrivain en 'portraitiste', analogue contemporain des peintres de cour : l'écrivain s'affiche sous contrat (à la différence de la position de Roberto Saviano)" ("Le Credit Crunch" 92) ["One of the strengths of Walter Siti's novel is that it conceals nothing of the ambiguity, if not the perversion, of the writer's position as a 'portraitist', a contemporary analogy of a court painter: the writer shows himself to be under contract (unlike Roberto Saviano's position)"]. Bouju insists on the difference between Saviano's *engagé* stance and the "perversion" of the position of the writer who "shows himself to be under contract". It is therefore the presence of the figure of the *artist under contract* which provides a ground for comparative analysis between different narratives of organized crime. As a metaphor, this figure works as a commentary on the problematic proximity and dependence of intellectuals and writers vis-à-vis organized crime. I believe, however, that the autofictive nature of Rascón Banda's and Siti's novels adds another layer of complexity to the matter.

In *Gomorra*, despite Saviano's deliberate generic transgressions, the narrator's repeated claims of truth and authenticity facilitate the identification of the narrator and the author, thus establishing the testimonial dimension of Saviano's writing. On the other hand, Ivonne Sánchez Becerril and Carlos Ávila have stressed the importance of allegory in *Tabajos del reino*, claiming that the depiction of the Artist's encounter with the world of narcotraffickers is not a realistic account of the author's experience, for it never mentions the word "narcotrafficking", but is rather a "fable" which reflects on the relationship between art and power (Sánchez Becerril 142; Ávila 148). The allegorical key, in Herrera's novel, and the testimonial key, in Saviano's reportage, provide clear indications about how these books are meant to be read: the work to stabilize the foundation of a reading pact or

contract—something that autofictive novels like *Contrabando* and *Resistere non serve a niente* tend to subvert. The notion of a *reading pact* has been recognized as the structuring device of the autobiographical genre since Philippe Lejeune, in *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975), stated that “le genre autobiographique est un genre contractuel” (44) [“the autobiographical genre is a contractual genre”]. Autofiction, in contrast, establishes the identity of the author and the narrator while picturing the latter in fictional situations and fictionalizing the conditions of production of the book itself. Siti’s encounter with the trader Tommaso, who asks him to write a book about his life, is an entirely imaginary episode, even though this circumstance is presented as the origin of the novel. In *Contrabando*, the book is presented as a collection of notes and fragments written during the narrator’s trip to Santa Rosa. However, the narrator’s travelling to his hometown leads him to meet characters which partly belong to the real world and partly belong to the fictional universes of the *corridos* and Rascón Banda’s own theatre plays. The represented situations cannot be interpreted in a literal way, neither can they be read exclusively as metaphors. In both cases, the overlapping of factuality and fictionality makes it difficult to distinguish “real” characters from the paper creatures invented by the authors. This, in turn, problematizes the reliability of both narratives and redefines the implicit reading pact on paradoxical grounds.

This article analyses the hermeneutic properties of Herrera’s, Siti’s and Rascón Banda’s complex fictional strategies and assesses their ability to overcome impasses that were identified in texts such as *Gomorra* or in the Mexican *narcoliteratura* [narco literature]. From the intra-diegetic representation of an author under contract with organized crime (a key aspect of Herrera’s *Trabajos del reino*), to the blurring of the autobiographical pact with the reader in *Resistere non serve a niente* and *Contrabando*, how do the authors creatively question the credibility and the authority of their own literary discourse on organized crime? To what extent does the contractual dimension of the literary text facilitate an original reflection on the criminal phenomenon they seek to interpret? To explore these questions, I shall start with a presentation of the novels and the contexts from which they emerge, showing how these novels create an ambiguous fictional space in which the author projects the figure of his double. I will then assess the ambiguous position of the writer in the diegesis, explaining how the pact between the main character and the member of a criminal organization determines the production of the text. I will finally address the fictional resolutions provided by the authors, showing that such solutions are operated in the form of metaleptic interventions.

Saviano and the Others: Literature and Organized Crime in Mexico and Italy

THE topic of organized criminality plays an important part in the contemporary mutations of the literary field in Mexico and Italy. In Mexico, critics have initially used the term *narcoliteratura* to describe narratives that explore the aesthetical aspects of criminal subcultures linked to narco trafficking since the be-

ginning of the twentieth century. The peripheral dimension of *narcoliteratura*, primarily associated with writers from the Northern States of Mexico, caused the pejorative use of the word to prevail in the critical discourse dominated by Mexico City. This appeared in a much debated article written by Rafael Lemus in 2005, which reduced all the recent literary production from Northern Mexico to *narcoliteratura* and blamed it for falling into “un costumbrismo dócil, en la abulia formal” (Lemus) [“a docile *costumbrismo* (folklore), in formal apathy”]. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the meaning of the term was extended because many authors, including writers from Mexico City, chose to write narratives inspired by the current war on drugs in Mexico. Palaversich links the recent boom of *narcoliteratura* to the prominence of narco-related topics in mass-media, following the rise of Mexico’s most famous drug cartels in the 1980s and the spectacular increase of violence in the early 2000s. While Palaversich argues that *narcoliteratura* participates in “la normalización y *mainstreaming* del fenómeno narco” (g) [“the normalization and mainstreaming of the narco phenomenon”], Valeria Luiselli laments the overly close attention paid by foreign critics to the literature of narcotrafficking: “Está bastante claro que lo único que interesa de México fuera de México es el espectáculo de su inmolación” [“It is quite clear that the only thing interesting about Mexico outside of Mexico is the spectacle of its immolation”]. Oswaldo Zavala contends that narratives of narcotrafficking possess inherent “critical limit[s]” which lead them to reproduce hegemonic views on criminality and violence (340). On the other hand, Hermann Herlinghaus advocates for a rehabilitation of narconarratives, arguing that their aesthetic approach to organized crime provides “a unique agency of perception and understanding” (159–60).

In this polarized critical context, *Contrabando* and *Trabajos del reino* have played an important part in the cultural legitimation of literary representations of narcotrafficking. Both authors showed that the representation of organized crime could result in ambitious literary works that move beyond the spectacular exploitation of the phenomenon through the overused formulas of crime fiction. It is worth noting that both novels received public attention a few years after the beginning of Mexico’s war on drugs in 2006, when narco violence became a central topic in the media. *Contrabando*, which received the Juan Rulfo Prize in 1991, was only published by Planeta after Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda’s death in 2008. In his laudatory review of the text for *Letras Libres*, the Mexican critic Fernando García Ramírez comments on the impact of the delayed reception of *Contrabando* on the Mexican audience: “Lo que cuenta Rascón Banda en ella es lo que estamos ahora viviendo, lo que Rascón cuenta es lo que había venido pasando en México y nos negábamos a ver. [...] Hoy la novela de Rascón parece escrita ayer” [“What Rascón Banda tells in it (the novel) is what we are living today, what Rascón tells is what had been going on in Mexico and we refused to see. (...) Today, Rascón’s novel looks like it was written yesterday”].

Trabajos del reino [*Kingdom Cons*], Yuri Herrera’s first novel, was published in 2004 but started to attract international attention after it received the first edition of the prize *Otras voces, otros ámbitos* in Spain in 2008. Following the publication

of Herrera's second novel, *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009) [*Signs Preceding the End of the World* (2015)], the 2010 Spanish edition of *Trabajos del reino* provided the basis for the translations into English, French, German, and Italian. As the Mexican war on drugs seemed to reach a peak of extreme brutality, with thousands of victims and gruesome acts of narcoterrorism, *Trabajos del reino* and *Contrabando* were perceived as worthy literary responses to the country's collective trauma. Both novels avoided reproducing the dominant media discourse on violence, allowing the readers to re-imagine the violence of narcotrafficking through a distinct literary language.

According to Sarah Amrani, Italian writers confronted the issue of organized crime long before the breakthrough of *Gomorra*. The literature on the mafia is as old as the criminal phenomenon itself, although numbers of critical representations of the phenomenon started to rise in the 1950s–60s (Coluccello), particularly thanks to Leonardo Sciascia.² Amrani argues that, after the deaths of Italy's great intellectuals and writers who had denounced the connections between the political sphere and organized crime in the 1960s (Sciascia, Dolci, Pasolini), the public exposure of Tangentopoli—a corrupt system for the illegal funding of political parties by organized crime—caused a new generation of writers to focus on socio-political issues. The conjunction of the political crisis and the arrival of new authors on the literary scene led Amrani to consider 1994 as an “anno zero” [“year zero”] for contemporary Italian literature, marked by the development of noir fiction and the growing hybridity of fiction and non-fiction (89). This process, initially led by noir fiction writers like Massimo Carlotto, later prompted reflections on the possibility of a “ritorno alla realtà” [“return to reality”] in Italian literature, a notion critically scrutinized by Silvia Contarini et al.:

Il “ritorno alla realtà” sembra essere il concetto centrale e il fattore polarizzante sia della creazione letteraria e artistica sia degli studi critici e filosofici degli anni Zero in Italia. Concetto controverso, esso è stato negli ultimi anni discusso e sottoposto al vaglio di prospettive letterarie, storico-sociali e antropologiche da parte di numerosi critici, in quanto investe, nelle sue molteplici risultanze, le scritture fondate tanto sul sistema di segni verbali quanto sulle rappresentazioni iconiche [. . .]. (8)

[The “return to reality” seems to be the central concept and the polarizing factor of both literary and artistic creation as well as critical and philosophical studies in 2000s Italy. A controversial concept, in recent years it has been discussed and subjected to the scrutiny of literary, historical-social and anthropological perspectives by numerous critics, as it invests, in its multiple consequences, in the writings based on the system of verbal signs as well as in visual representations (. . .).]

² In his article “Letteratura e mafia” Leonardo Sciascia criticized the culturalist discourses which aligned Sicilian culture with illegality and crime (140–43). Simultaneously, he refuted the romantic vision of mafia and organized crime in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. In his novels, Sciascia drew on the forms of detective fiction in order to elucidate the specific workings of mafia crimes and denounce them, in a time when the very existence of the mafia was overlooked or denied by the authorities.

The controversial notion of a *return to reality* was formally expressed for the first time in 2006 by Raffaele Donnarumma (39). Rather than to reality in the broad sense, he takes this notion to refer to the return of Italian literature to a form of literary activism, through the representation of matters of public interest—such as organized crime—in fiction and non-fiction narratives (43).

The implications of this idea are key to understanding the political dimension of Saviano's text. Donnarumma believes that *Gomorra*, driven by "l'urgenza di questioni che non ammettono dilazioni, ironie, travestimenti" (40) ["the urgency of matters which do not admit digressions, irony, trickery"] breaks with the self-referential logic of postmodern literature, which prevailed in the early 2000s: "il suo intento primo è rompere la retorica della trasformazione di ogni discorso in fiction" (40) ["his (Saviano's) first intention is to break the logic of transforming all speech into fiction"]. According to the Italian writer Tiziano Scarpa, Saviano's effort to change reality through his writings can be interpreted as an act of *parrhesia*, a notion previously defined by Michel Foucault: "[Saviano] ha fatto un atto di *parresia*, che, come ha analizzato Foucault negli ultimi suoi corsi al Collège de France, implica rischio, coraggio, libertà, coinvolgimento personale" (12) ["(Saviano) has performed an act of *parrhesia*, which, according to Foucault's analysis in his last courses at the Collège de France, implies risk, courage, freedom, personal commitment"]. Scarpa highlights two aspects of Saviano's writing: a direct address to power and a dimension of danger explicitly assumed by the author. In Scarpa's words, Saviano committed an act of *parrhesia* because he was the object of a death sentence issued by the camorra bosses, whose reaction retrospectively proved the relevance of Saviano's denunciation. These aspects indeed belong to Foucault's broader analysis of the concept in *The Courage of Truth*:

The parrhesiast [...] personally signs, as it were, the truth he states, he binds himself to this truth, and he is consequently bound to it and by it. [...] the subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking] this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, a risk which concerns his relationship with the person to whom he is speaking. (11)

Therefore, *parrhesia*, in Foucault's words, is a "regime of truth-telling" (11) endorsed by the writer, who risks his own life by denouncing organized crime to the public. In this configuration, the writer's "parola" (translated as "the word" in the English edition) becomes the instrument of the writer's confrontation with a world structured by organized crime. In a famous passage where *Gomorra*'s narrator visits Pier Paolo Pasolini's grave, the former reflects on the ability of the literary word to unveil the logic of criminal power, by breaking through reality like a "truffle pig" or the "cutting edge" of a knife: "[Era] ancora possibile inseguire come porci da tartufo le dinamiche del reale, l'affermazione dei poteri, senza metafore, senza mediazioni, con la sola lama della scrittura" (Saviano, *Gomorra* 232) ["(it was) still possible to sniff out, like truffle pigs, the dynamics of the real, the affirmation of power, without metaphors, without mediation, with nothing but the cutting edge of the word" (*Gomorrhah* 212)].

These metaphors materialize the ambition of Saviano's discourse: to exert an influence on reality. In her article "Le quattro forze di *Gomorra*" [The Four Strengths of Gomorrah], Carla Benedetti praised the book's "forza illocutoria" ["illocutory force"]. However, these images also sustain the book's repeated assertions that true knowledge of organized crime derives from a direct, unmediated cognitive experience of it. When the author pictures himself wandering in the street of Naples, he seeks to get physically as close as possible to the crime scenes. Saviano writes: "E comprendere significava almeno farne parte. Non c'è scelta, e non credo vi fosse altro modo per capire le cose" (*Gomorra* 83) ["And understanding meant being part of it somehow. I had no choice; as far as I'm concerned, it's the only way to understand things" (*Gomorra* 73)]. Two aspects thus intertwine in Saviano's writing. The first aspect is the triumphalist ethos of the investigator who shows himself to be immersed in the reality he describes, a configuration inspired by the immersive model of gonzo journalism. The second aspect regards the relation between the lived experience and the written text, and refers to the establishment of a reading contract in the terms of Lejeune: Saviano declares that he writes about what he experienced first-hand. While the first aspect refers to the fictional fabrication of a narrative persona, the second aspect regards the testimonial value of the text and implies an ethical pact with the reader. *Gomorra* caused controversy because Saviano mixed the two aspects, thus establishing an ambiguous referential pact with the reader. When it turned out Saviano had combined his lived experience with fictional invention in some passages of his book, it became harder to decide whether *Gomorra* was the honest account of a lived experience or if the sense of reality that emanated from it was the result of convincing writing.³ In this respect, Saviano's statement—"being part of it" (instead of "being there", for example)—sounds like an accidental revelation of the ambivalence of the author's self-representation as a direct witness of organized crime. Yet Saviano never acknowledges this ambiguity and never reflects on the potential ethical implications of his narrator's hesitation between observation ("being there") and participation ("being part of it").

The Author Under Contract: Literature Between Truth and Justice

IN a recent article, Siti addresses the inconspicuous ambivalences of Saviano's texts. While expressing admiration for *Gomorra*, Siti questions the Neapolitan writer's fascination with "situazioni estreme" ["extreme situations"] and argues that the strength of literature is not to reproduce the real, but to make a self-conscious and productive use of ambiguity: "Il maggiore obiettivo della letteratura non è la testimonianza ma l'avventura conoscitiva. [...] L'ambiguità, lo spessore, la polise-mia fanno emergere quel che non si sa ancora; per questo la letteratura non può

³ The accuracy of the fictionalized episodes of *Gomorra* was questioned by several critics (see, for example, Dal Lago; Pellini; Santino). *Gomorra* was mainly studied with regard to the evolution of testimonial literature in Italy or the postmodern aspects of non-fiction writings (see, for example, Giglioli; Mazzearella).

prestarsi a fare da altoparlante a quel che già si crede giusto” (“Preghiere”) [“The main objective of literature is not the testimony but the cognitive adventure. (...) The ambiguity, the thickness, the polysemy make what is not known yet emerge; this is why literature cannot lend itself to being the advocate of what is already believed to be right”]. The criticism of Saviano’s claims to authenticity and the defence of ambiguity should be understood as a defence of the cognitive and heuristic values of fiction: Siti praises literature’s ability to deploy complex thought experiments in the form of a cognitive adventure for the reader.

Using Siti’s perspective to read Herrera’s *Trabajos del reino*, it is possible to see how the issue of speaking truth to power can be addressed in a complex way through fiction. Lobo, a singer under contract, is initially committed to praise the King for propaganda purposes and he actively participates in the symbolic edification of the criminal realm. Soon, though, Lobo experiences a conflict of loyalty between his duty as a propagandist and the devotion to his art:

[...] pero lo suyo es arte, compa, usted no tiene por qué atorarse con pura palabra sobre el Señor.—¿Por qué no? Yo escribo de lo que me emociona, y si lo que me emociona es la obra del Jefe, ¿por qué no?—Claro, claro, no me entienda mal. [...] Yo a usted lo veo pura pasión, y si un día tiene que escoger entre la pasión y la obligación, Artista, entonces sí que está jodido. (Herrera, *Trabajos del reino* 88)

[“(...) but what you do is art, amigo, no need to use all your words of praise on Señor.” “Why not? I write about what moves me, and if what moves me are the things the Chief does, then why not?” “Sure, sure, don’t get me wrong, Artist (...). Seems to me like you’re pure passion, and if one day you have to choose between your passion and your obligation, Artist, then you are truly fucked.” (*Kingdom Cons*)]

The imagery of the artist as an employee, a mercenary or a court artist employed by a criminal character is an aspect *Resistere non serve a niente* and *Trabajos del reino* have in common. In both novels, the plot revolves around a transaction between the main character, a writer or an artist, and a member of organized crime. In the beginning of *Resistere non serve a niente*, Walter, the fictional double of Walter Siti in his novel, remarks: “Lo diceva Kafka ed è vero... la letteratura è il salario per il servizio del diavolo” (Siti, *Resistere* 45) [“Kafka said it and it was true... literature is paid work at the service of the devil”]. Several readings thus interpret Lobo’s adventure as an initiatory journey: Lobo is blinded by the illusions of the Palace but manages to free himself from his pact with the criminal power (Lepage et al.). Even so, Lobo shows no intention of denouncing the King’s crimes to the public. Rather naively, towards the end of the novel, he even attempts to warn the King about the betrayal of his allies by writing a song, the broadcasting of which publicly exposes the King’s weaknesses. As a result, he is disgraced and must flee from the Court. Lobo wrongly believes that his status as an Artist makes him the King’s equal and allows him to express inconvenient truths: “[...] intuýó que la relación entre ellos había pasado a otro ámbito, más derecho, en el

que compartían una visión mas acabada del mundo y que admitía intercambiar espejos como el que el Artista había construido” (Herrera, *Trabajos del reino* 107) [“(...) he intuited that the relationship between them had entered new territory, a tighter place, where they shared a more complete view of the world that allowed mirrors like the one the Artist had constructed to be exchanged” (*Kingdom Cons*)]. The most intriguing commentary on the social function of art occurs later, when Lobo hears of the King’s demise after the betrayal of his allies. The singer realizes he is neither interested in correcting the false information of the press nor eager to inform the public about the facts disguised by the newspaper’s propaganda:

He ahí una historia para ser cantada, no la que el Rey había representado con gracia hasta el final, sino la otra, la de las máscaras, la del egoísmo, la de la miseria. Y luego se dijo: Una historia para ser contada por alguien más. ¿Para qué iba a ponerse a refutar las invenciones del periódico? A estas alturas prefería la verdad que la historia verdadera. (Herrera, *Trabajos del reino* 122)

[There’s a story to be sung, not the role the King had played with grace until the end, but the other tale, the one about masks, and egotism, and misery. And then he said to himself: A story for someone else to sing. Why should he refute the paper’s cock and bull? At this stage he preferred the truth over the true story. (*Kingdom Cons*)]

The final, enigmatic sentence—“he preferred the truth over the true story”—blurs the nature of the artist’s commitment: for Lobo, the truth of his art does not consist in unveiling the true story, the facts hidden by the official version of the press. This comment about the truth of art, as opposed to the true story based on facts, could be better understood once read through Siti’s opposition between truth and justice at the end of *Resistere non serve a niente*. In a “Nota al testo” [“Note to the text”], Siti explains the necessity of using fiction, not only to preserve himself or his sources from prosecution, but to encode a truth that would otherwise be untransmissible to the reader. Therefore, the artist’s commitment is to truth, not justice, a choice which paradoxically justifies the experimental use of fiction instead of providing evidence that would lead to prosecution: “Dovendo scegliere tra giustizia e verità, ho preferito la seconda (pur presentandosi la verità in forme indigeste, settarie e non trasmissibili)” (*Resistere* 319) [“I had to choose between justice and truth, so I preferred the second one (even though truth showed itself in unpalatable, sectary and untransmissible forms)”].

Siti’s novel revolves around the author’s initiation to the existence of a nebula of new mafias operating in international finance. He denounces the seizure of the market economy by the mafia, describing how the volatility of the market and the opacity of hedge funds make it impossible to distinguish legal activities from illegal ones. Within the narrative, when the character gets access to confidential information, he is not allowed to disclose it and must promise to change names and locations in order to “cover the tracks”: “Ti forniremo ampi dettagli, così potrai farti un quadro... [...] ma una clausola dev’essere chiara fin da ora, se accetti di

capire devi anche essere disponibile a depistare” (*Resistere* 243) [“We’ll provide a wide amount of details, so you can have the big picture. . . (.) but here’s a clause that’s got to be clear from now on, if you accept to understand, you’ve got to be up for covering the tracks”]. Access to confidential information thus comes at a price: the obligation to encrypt the information that would be of critical relevance. The promise to hide the names was the necessary condition for the transmission of the secret to the author. The use of fiction is therefore linked to the search for a suitable artistic form that makes the facts transmissible.

In *Contrabando*, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda addresses the pervasiveness of collective participation in crime in the peripheral communities of the nation state and shows that the intellectual does not exempt him- or herself from participating in a culture of illegality. Rascón Banda writes before the 2000s, at a time when the main figures of narcotrafficking like Rafael Caro Quintero (twice mentioned in the novel) were known by the public, even though many aspects of the violence linked to narcotrafficking, especially its repression by the State, was not much spoken of. Like the narrator of *Resistere non serve a niente*, in *Contrabando*, the narrator is an outsider who knows little about the violent context he is progressively confronted with. The account of the collective devastation in the State of Chihuahua is voiced by the residents to the writer: “¿Qué te parece, muchacho? La traición y el contrabando terminan con muchas vidas. Acaban también con pueblos. Santa Rosa es ahora un pueblo de casas cerradas. [. . .] Un mundo de extraños que no se saludan en la calle” (Rascón Banda 89) [“What do you think, young man? Betrayal and contraband end many lives. They also end villages. Now Santa Rosa is a village of closed doors. (. . .) A world of strangers who don’t greet each other in the street”].

While Herrera and Siti focus on criminal environments that are secretive and exclude the outside world, in Santa Rosa, organized crime is everywhere and permeates everyday life. Rumours in the town create a permanent sense of confusion about the identity of the killers: the characters cannot distinguish between narcotraffickers and the armed forces of the State, while many of their relatives decide to take part in drug smuggling: “[a]cá en Santa Rosa no hay ley que valga ni gente libre de pena, dice mi madre. [. . .] Acá no se sabe quién es quién” (Rascón Banda 209) [“Here in Santa Rosa there is no law that prevails and no people without sorrow, my mother says. (. . .) Here you don’t know who is who”]. The reality of narcotrafficking is addressed as a multi-layered phenomenon in which everyone, including the writer, is involved. Esch, like Palaversich and other commentators, has rightly pointed out the passages when a character observes that the narrator is implicated in the general confusion, for he looks like a narco or a police officer: “Y tú, ¿eres narco? me preguntó. Le contesté que no. Entonces eres judicial, afirmó con seguridad. ¿Por qué? le reclamé. Es que miras igual que ellos, respondió” (Rascón Banda 23) [“And you, are you a narco? she asked. I answered no. She claimed with certainty: then you’re a police officer. I protested: why? You look just like them, she answered”]. Not only does Hugo look like a narco or a police officer, but rumours that he would attract publicity to the village allegedly lead

to the abduction of Julián, Hugo's cousin and mayor of the town. The interest of *Contrabando* thus lies in the account of the problematic aspects of the writer's presence among the residents of Santa Rosa: "El secuestro de Julián, dijo mi tío apretándome un brazo, tiene que ver contigo y con estos papeles, [...] tu eres la única causa de que mi hijo este desaparecido. Por qué fregados tuviste que venir a chingarnos, si aquí estábamos en paz" (Rascón Banda 108) ["Julián's kidnapping, my uncle said, grasping my arm, has to do with you and these papers, (...) you're the only reason for my son's disappearance. Why the hell did you have to come here and fuck with our lives, if we were living in peace here"]. Even though they are not contractual in the strict sense, these distant interactions between the lettered subject and the vendettas between different mafioso groups problematize the latter's position in Santa Rosa. In a world where the limits between legality and illegality are blurred to the point of indistinction, the writer is challenged to acknowledge that he, too, can be held accountable, whether that makes him the criminals' unwilling accomplice or their potential victim.

This difficulty specifically arises from the very status of Hugo as a writer, since he is present in the village to fulfil a professional contract. Hugo goes to his hometown to find inspiration for a movie script that was commissioned to him by a singer, Antonio Aguilar. The novel represents Hugo's attempts to collect stories from the residents of Santa Rosa in order to grant authenticity to the script, a draft of which is reproduced in the penultimate chapter, "Triste recuerdo" [Sad Memory] (Rascón Banda 174–206). Throughout the book, Hugo assembles stories about Valente Armenta, a narcotrafficker who turns out to be a distant family relative, then writes a melodrama which includes reference to Armenta's activities as narco. In the epilogue, Aguilar takes the inclusion of the criminal topic in the script as a reason to reject it:

Me debo a mi público, que es la gente de abajo, el auténtico pueblo que me creó y me sostiene, y no puedo ofrecerles algo así, pues esperan de mí una verdadera historia de amor, de amor puro, y no una venganza de narcos. Además, no puedo ofender a estos amigos, que [...] me invitan a sus fiestas, me contaron que dijo al rechazar el guión, pero eso sí, no me lo pagó y yo fui tan imbécil que no le pedí el anticipo que siempre se pide para evitar abusos. (Rascón Banda 210)

[I owe myself to my audience, the people from below, the authentic people who made me and support me, and I can't give them something like that, because, from me, they expect a true love story, not a narco vengeance. Besides, I can't offend these friends who (...) invite me to their parties, I was told he said when he rejected the script, but he sure did not pay me for it and I was such an idiot I did not ask him for the advance payment that you always request in order to avoid abuses.]

Aguilar argues that the script may offend his sponsors and so-called friends, whose identity is not made explicit in the text. Esch suggests that the friends in question could be people linked to the narco world: "the writer also hears that Aguilar is unwilling to offend his narco friends" (173). Very much like Herrera's singer,

the narrator receives an economic sanction because he betrayed the conditions of Aguilar's artistic command. While in Herrera's novel, Lobo is violently reminded of his status as the King's underling, surprisingly Rascón Banda's novel plays down the conflict between the two men, as Hugo never argues with Aguilar about the script and simply mentions the latter's refusal without dwelling on it. I would suggest that Hugo's inability to fulfil Aguilar's contract seems to stem from a conflict of loyalty, the terms of which are kept implicit in the text. Aguilar pretends to owe himself to his "audience", allegedly the "authentic people", while his real worries only concern the reactions of his mysterious "friends". Hugo, in response, pretends to write a fashionable melodrama in the taste of the so-called authentic people, when in fact his loyalty goes not to Aguilar's "audience", but to the real people of Santa Rosa. This concern appears in the narrator's claim that he is no more than an scribe who testifies to facts:

Los personajes tendrán el mismo final que tuvieron en Santa Rosa, para no cambiar la realidad, que sobrepasa en acción dramática a cualquier ficción [...] Si la Saurina, me digo, con su carga de sabiduría y su valija de engaños no pudo modificar ese destino, no trae caso que lo haga yo, un simple escribano que solo da fe de los hechos. (Rascón Banda 172–74)

[The characters will meet the same end they did in Santa Rosa, so as not to change the reality, which, in terms of dramatic action, surpasses any fiction (...) I tell myself that if the Saurina, with her load of wisdom and her suitcase of cunning, could not change this destiny, there is no point in my doing so, for I'm a simple scribe who only testifies to facts.]

This subversion, which consists in obliquely referring to narco violence in a mass cultural product, "depicts the dilemma of the professional writer who in a violent and commercial context is torn between social commitment, the market, and safety concerns" (Esch 170). This suggests that the script reproduced in *Contrabando* illustrates the narrator's inability to reconcile these contradictory injunctions or choose between them. Hugo's ability to subvert the desire of his commissioner thus leaves the following questions unanswered: to whom or what is the writer committed? What freedom is there for the artist?

One possible answer could be given by the book itself, should one consider that the novel rejects the injunctions of the market (represented by Aguilar and his narco friends) to embrace social commitment through testimonial writing. However, the answer provided by the novel is less than clear, because the issue of commitment is paradoxically illuminated by a contradictory idea which pervades the whole text: the idea of betrayal. Throughout the novel, the writer receives other demands from residents of Santa Rosa, who want him to tell about the violence they suffer. Yet he systematically refuses or is unable to honour them: "¿Y de qué vives, entonces? Soy escritor. Ah, mira nomás, escritor. Pues haz un corrido de lo que me pasó, para que el mundo lo sepa. Yo no hago corridos. Qué lástima, dijo, como eres escritor, lo pensé" (Rascón Banda 12) ["And how do you make a living? I'm a writer. Oh well, a writer. Then write a corrido about what

happened to me, so that the world knows. I don't do corridos. Too bad, she said, since you're a writer, I thought you did"]. The strongest demand comes at the end of the novel from the narrator's mother, who urges him not to tell what he saw in the village: "Olvídate de lo que viste y escuchaste acá. Haz de cuenta que fue una simple pesadilla" (209) ["Forget everything you saw and heard here. Just realise it was a simple nightmare"]. In the last chapter, the narrator states that he will burn everything he wrote in Santa Rosa, which of course raises suspicion about the very existence of the book in the reader's hands. Ironically, the fiction of authenticity built by Rascón Banda requires the reader to believe that the book was somehow smuggled to the public despite the mother's interdiction: in this fiction, the very existence of the text would then be due to the narrator's betrayal of the mother's command. It is, of course, a very elaborate narrative manoeuvre, which expands on the polysemy of the book's title, "Contrabando", which can mean both "contraband" and "smuggling". As noticed by Martín Manuel Apfalter Valero's work on the novel's manuscript, Rascón Banda presented *Contrabando* to the Juan Rulfo prize in 1991 under the pseudonym "El Traficante" [The Smuggler]. The title "Contrabando" also refers to a famous *corrido* performed by Los Tigres del Norte in 1972, called "Contrabando y traición" [Smuggling and Betrayal], a leitmotiv throughout the novel. Therefore, the signifier "betrayal" is implicitly contained in the title and casts its shadow over the whole text. The testimonial duty undertaken by the narrator comes at the price of betraying his mother's wish. It reflects a profound ethical difficulty that results from the impossibility of reconciling contradictory mandates. To this end, the novel concludes with a notable lack of closure: the narrator abandons the residents of Santa Rosa to an uncertain destiny, but embarks on a new artistic project, the creation of a theatre play inspired by the "Gato Montés", another narcotrafficker.

According to Bouju, *Resistere non serve a niente* is also a narrative of betrayal and debt recovery ("Être" 59). Like *Contrabando*, *Resistere non serve a niente* focuses on mafia vendettas resulting from blood debts linked, among other things, to the manipulation of credit and debt by financial institutions. Tommaso, a successful speculator owning a hedge fund in Milan, is the son of a mafioso punished by the organization, who pays off his father's debt by helping the mafia infiltrate the banking and finance sectors. Walter, the autofictive narrator of the story and a fictional double of Siti, is pressured by money issues and paid by Tommaso to write a book about his life; thus the notion of debt and contract pervades the relations between all the characters of the story, including the figure of the author and his subject. The novel establishes disturbing parallels between Walter and Tommaso, and between the art of the writer and the art of financial speculation. Conversations between the two characters focus on literature as a mirror of the new mafias' criminal activity. In a comment about speculative finance, Walter tells Tommaso that speculation is the common denominator of their jobs: "Anche voi privilegiate il possibile rispetto al reale... date fiato all'infinito, non siete solo i contatori Geiger della volontà di potere" (Siti, *Resistere* 46) ["You too, you privilege the possible over the real... you give breath to infinity, you are not just the Geiger

counters of the will to power”]. The speculative function of literature is developed in a specular play, making Walter and Tommaso the mirror of each other. Walter’s text helps Tommaso fulfil a personal identity quest: “Devi dirmelo chi sono io” (49) [“You must tell me who I am”]. However, the portrait of Tommaso becomes a blurred mirror in which the narrator watches himself through Tommaso’s image: “Forse sei il mio stuntman, quello che esegue per me le scene pericolose... un prototipo della mutazione... o forse, più in profondità, sei il mio vendicatore. [...] Forse il mio sangue ho trovato chi lo vuole... questo libro funzionerà come una prova per lui... per vedere se sarà capace di amarme anche così” (Siti, *Resistere* 314–15) [“Maybe you’re my stuntman, the one who executes the dangerous scenes... a prototype of the mutation... Or maybe, more deeply, you’re my avenger... (...) Maybe I found the one who will have my blood... This book may work as a proof for him... to see if he will be able to love me like this”]. By watching himself in Tommaso’s mirror, Walter tries to resolve the enigma of his own identity as a writer under contract with organized crime. By blurring the difference between the author and the subject of his book, *Resistere non serve a niente* deconstructs the authority of the writer by showing him in a position of fragility which “menace de le rendre dépendant de son objet” (Bouju, “Le Credit Crunch” 88) [“threatens to make him dependent on his object”].

Subverting the Contract: Textual Manipulations and Metaliterary Interventions

A strong parallel between the author’s position as a writer under contract and prostitution is established in the first chapter of Siti’s novel, a mock essay about an ethologic experience made with laboratory monkeys that induced them to prostitution. Tommaso ultimately urges Walter to abandon the project out of concern that he will be blamed for selling himself to criminality, to which Walter answers that he will pretend that Tommaso is a fictional character: “‘Tutti diranno che ti sei venduto alla criminalità organizzata, da uno come me si dovrebbe stare lontani.’ ‘Dichiarerò che sei un frutto della mia immaginazione... questo è il vantaggio dei romanzi... ti ho delegato a vivere temi che sono i miei... in pratica scriverò un romanzo per procura’” (Siti, *Resistere*) [“‘Everyone will say you sold yourself to organized crime, one should stay away from someone like me.’ ‘I’ll declare that you’re the fruit of my imagination... That is the advantage of novels... I have assigned you to live matters that are mine, like a delegate... In practice, I’ll write a novel by proxy’”]. The quotation explicitly shows the figure of a writer in the pay of organized crime and reveals how Siti overturns the relation of dependence between the writer and his subject through a metafictional device: metalepsis. Walter’s promise to make Tommaso pass as an imaginary character (“I will declare”) is followed by a segment in which the narrator speaks to him as if he was in fact a fictional character (“I have assigned you”). This declaration can be interpreted as a metaleptic intervention in which the writer overturns the terms of the fictional contract and takes back control over the narrative. How does this metaleptic game enrich the literary representation of the mafia in the text?

Gérard Genette defines metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse” (234–35). Dorrit Cohn expands on Genette’s definition by introducing a distinction between “interior metalepsis”, a circulation of a character “between a primary and a secondary story, or between a tertiary and secondary story” (106), and “exterior metalepsis”, the intervention of the real-world writer inside his fictional world” (106). In this section, I provide a description of such metaleptic interventions in *Resistere non serve a niente* and *Contrabando*. However, I show that while restoring the authority of the writer over his creative gesture, these interventions do not offer a clear solution to the problem of the writer under contract.

In *Contrabando*, the *mise-en-abyme* of the narrator’s writing process reveals the author’s attempts to transform the reality he experiences in Santa Rosa into a narratable fiction: Hugo makes many artistic attempts to reproduce the reality of Santa Rosa in an oblique way, which involves the reproduction of testimonies in the form of short stories and a theatre play which appears in the twentieth chapter, “Guerrero Negro” [Black Warrior]. While the text’s montage of narrative fragments reveals the author’s talents as a polygraph, the very presence of the play in the novel is problematic. The narrator’s attempt to write a play about narcotrafficking is never justified by the events he witnesses in Santa Rosa. He rather presents the play as some sort of homework due for a literary workshop in Mexico City. Furthermore, the play is not an original creation but a self-reference: *Guerrero Negro* had been published in 1988, three years before the completion of *Contrabando*. By integrating the play into his novel and fictionalizing the conditions of its writing, Rascón Banda makes a complex metaleptic operation which re-evaluates the whole meaning of the play: the novel recontextualizes it, by establishing implicit connections between the writing of the play and the experience lived by the writer in Santa Rosa. Characters of *Contrabando* thus circulate between the world of Santa Rosa and the literary realm of Rascón Banda’s theatre plays, blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. The writer, confronted with the violence of organized crime and the limitations of the form he is authorized to create, affirms a form of artistic mastery by making the monstrous and unrepresentable reality of Santa Rosa porous with its own fictional universe.

If the use of metalepsis is occasional in Rascón Banda’s work, it is employed as a structuring device in Siti’s novel. *Resistere non serve a niente* is regularly interrupted by the author’s entrances and exits from “the stage”: “Dunque ora congedatemi come un Prologo di teatro, che si affardellerà di some reali (tipo il denaro, o peggio), per arrivare a una verita ma senza più comparire: in scena ci saranno solo le maschere” (51) [“So now dismiss me like a theatre prologue, which will deal with the real burdens (like money, or worse), to arrive at a truth without appearing anymore: only the masks will be on stage”]. The author’s appearances on the stage are described as “interventions”, a term which matches the definition of literary metalepsis. Siti “intervenes” in his text every time he feels his mission is in danger and he needs to get the story back on track:

Pronto? Qui parla l'autore... Lo so, avevo promesso che non mi sarei più ripresentato sul proscenio [...] ma ora è in gioco la natura stessa del mio mandato, il committente minaccia la revoca dell'incarico e ciò facendo scalza alle radici le motivazioni e il senso della scrittura—intervengo per legittima difesa, angosciato dal possibile insabbiamento del progetto. (*Resistere* 165)

[Hello? This is the author... I know, I promised I would not present myself again on the frontstage (...)] But now, the very nature of my mandate is at stake, the commissioner threatens to revoke the engagement, to attack the roots of the motivations and the sense of writing—I intervene in self-defence, anxious that the project might get silted up.]

What is the meaning of these metaleptic interventions? In Siti's book, the image of the writer under contract, a character who must write the biography of a criminal, is reversed into another ambiguous figure, the ventriloquist puppet master. The metaphor of the puppet and the ventriloquist pervades the whole text, from the image of Berlusconi's corpse, eviscerated and stuffed on a dissecting table by mysterious agents, to the narrator's attending a spectacle of puppet dolls: "[...] assistevo a uno spettacolo di burattini per adulti; [...] a un certo punto il burattino in scena ha protestato 'I maligni insinuano che dietro di me ci sia un tizio che mi fa parlare... sappiate che non è vero, sono io che faccio parlare lui'" (Siti, *Resistere* 51) ["I was attending a spectacle of puppet dolls for adults; (...) At one moment, a puppet on stage protested: 'malicious spirits insinuate that behind me, there's a guy that makes me speak... Know it isn't true, I'm the one who makes him speak'"]. The metaphor of the ventriloquist leaves the reader unable to distinguish the identity of the one speaking in the novel's interplay of voices and masks. Walter and Tommaso are two masks for the author, puppets on a stage or paper creatures whose interactions allow the book to explore in a dynamic way the hidden logics of criminal finance. Indeed, the mask of the artist under contract seems a fictional artefact which conceals the agency of a versatile author who reaffirms his control over the events recreated by his narrative. At the same time, the author's ubiquity as a character and a productive agent of the text could work as a critical instrument to understand a contemporary reality which, according to Siti, seems integrally infiltrated and permeated by the influence of organized crime. The writer's ability to move between the diegetic levels also underlines the fact that the narrator belongs to the same social world as the modern mafiosi he writes about. All of them belong to a grey zone in which crime, finance, politics, and legitimate culture seem to collide and to merge, to the point that it blurs our perception of reality.⁴ The ambivalence of the image of the ventriloquist probably reflects on this confusion; on the one hand, the ventriloquist represents the insidious work of the mafia, which manipulates its affiliates like puppets, but

⁴ The Italian antimafia professionals have borrowed the term *grey zone* from Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*. In *Manifesto dell'antimafia* Nando Dalla Chiesa explains that modern mafias expand thanks to their ability to substitute horizontal modes of cooperation with traditional, vertical relations of affiliation. The grey zone thus refers to actors of legal economy who normalize criminal complicity by making deals with the mafia as if it were a legitimate business partner.

on the other hand it also represents the author's aesthetic appropriation of his object. By forcing the readers to circulate between these different meanings, the book provides them with a lesson on how to "read" society, encouraging them to decipher an economy where the mafia's influence is exerted through the legal mask of finance.

Conclusion

IN this article I have attempted to explore how the description of organized crime by the writer risks the latter becoming dependent on the object he describes. The fictional situations represented in *Trabajos del reino*, *Resistere non serve a niente* and *Contrabando*, when contrasted with Saviano's approach to organized crime in *Gomorra*, problematize the social function of literature and question the mandate of the artist in democracies contaminated by the pervasiveness of organized crime. In the successive analysis of the texts, my aim was to highlight the process of a reversal of a relationship of anteriority between literature and organized crime. In other words, the writer does not simply constitute an image of organized crime by showing it or by making it the object of writing. In the diegesis of *Contrabando* and *Resistere non serve a niente*, the ubiquitous influence of organized crime is exerted on writing itself. It is organized crime that determines the making of the artistic work, by controlling its production and by authorizing its expression. The image of the artist under contract could well function as a symbol of the insidious legitimation, both economic and cultural, of organized crime in Italian and Mexican societies, including through "legitimate" culture. Therefore, the freedom of the artist against the pressure of criminal power might not be expressed through the "power of the word" (in Saviano's terms), nor in the triumphal form of the *parrhesia* (speaking truth to power). Instead, the concrete possibilities of literary writing about organized crime and the difficulties of this operation are examined through problematic imaginary characters and situations, which are staged and "tested" in an experimental space, the interstice delimited by fiction. In these texts, the position of ambiguity represented by the image of the writer under contract is not necessarily aporetic. However, very often, the solutions offered by the authors are not represented in the diegesis, but rather seem to operate on the level of the writing itself through metaleptic operations. Moreover, the sophistication of the formal games identified in the texts is rooted in an acute sense of the pervasiveness of contemporary organized crime. Alongside the integration of contemporary forms of organized crime into fiction, it is thus possible to think of fiction as a critical tool which decrypts the workings of criminal powers by implementing complex mental operations which facilitate their interpretation.

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